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WORDS  
  
WORDLESSNESS  
  
AND  
  
THE WORD

*Silence Reconsidered*

*from a*

*Literary Point of View*

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Pendle Hill Pamphlet 303

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Bien is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College, where he is also co-coordinator of Peace Studies. Educated at Deerfield, Harvard, Haverford, Bristol, Columbia, and Woodbrooke, he teaches mainly modern British prose, specializing in James Joyce, and does research mainly in modern Greek literature, specializing in Nikos Kazantzakis. He has been a visiting lecturer at Harvard, Melbourne, Woodbrooke, and—most recently—Pendle Hill, where he led a class in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. His past Quaker service includes supervising weekend workcamps and clerking his meeting. Currently he is a member of the Executive Board of Pendle Hill and is clerk of the Board of Overseers of Kendal at Hanover, a Quaker retirement community.

This essay obviously combines his literary and Quakerly involvements. Specifically, it grows out of his Dartmouth courses in modern British fiction, his deep sympathy for the mystical power of Quaker silence, his love of words, and his incorrigible weakness for all things Greek.

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Blessed be the man  
who in this confusion,  
this verbal muteness,  
utters a truthful word or two.  
Yet even more blessed be the man  
who, wresting his meaning  
from the bosom of silence,  
acknowledges the perfection  
of Unutterableness.

—S. S. Harkianakis

“I love to feel where words come from.”

—Chief Papunehang of the Delaware Indians,  
after hearing John Woolman pray in English.

It may seem churlish to discuss silence at length.<sup>1</sup> What can possibly be *said* about it? Most Quakers probably feel that silence needs to be experienced, not discussed, and that those who have known the spiritual power of a gathered meeting understand silence in their hearts as opposed to their minds.

All this is true up to a point. Yet early Friends were not loath to discuss silence: to defend it, justify it, explain it, even to understand it in their minds. Listen, for example, to Robert Barclay in his *Apology*:<sup>2</sup>

Nothing could be more unlike the natural will and wisdom of human beings than this silent waiting. . . . For when people are thus gathered together, they do not merely meet to hear men, or depend upon them, but they are inwardly taught to dwell with their minds on the Lord and to wait for his appearance in their hearts. . . . Thus the forwardness of the spirit of man is prevented from mixing itself with the worship of God. The form of this worship is completely naked and devoid of all outward and worldly splendor. Any occasion for the superstitious or idolatrous exercise of man's wisdom has no place here.

Barclay's point is that silence subtracts from worship the intervention of the human will and all other forms of idolatry, enabling the worshiper, as he says, to be "actuated by God's light and grace in the heart," and "not merely to hear men, or depend upon them."

This is an understanding that should be as valid for

Quakers today as it was in the seventeenth century when Friends were much more obsessed than we are with the alleged idolatry of Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and non-conformist Protestants. Indeed, when we gather in our silent meetings we still try, following Barclay's advice, "to abstain from one's own thoughts and to quiet the imagination. All of the mind's own labors and the roving of the imagination *on things that are essentially good as well as things that are evil* must be brought to a halt." If this is successful we speak of a gathered meeting because—again to quote Barclay—our soul, being "gathered out of all of its own thoughts and workings," is able "to possess and enjoy the Lord quietly and silently."

All that is fine. But a great deal has happened since the seventeenth century. Our religious and secular conditions are different, our patterns of thought are different, and so, perhaps, are our metaphysics, if we have any. We may still appreciate the emptying that occurs in a gathered meeting, but are we so sure any more about the meaning of a phrase such as "to possess and enjoy the Lord"?

So, while honoring the older understandings of silence, as well as the insistence that silence must be experienced to be understood, I nevertheless want to reconsider silence from a twentieth-century point of view. One of the major differences between the twentieth- and seventeenth-century mentalities is that now, in the twentieth, we tend to place language at the center of every epistemological discussion, *i.e.*, of every discussion of the nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge. The whole purpose of the epistemological beliefs and practices of early Friends was to remove language as a factor in human knowledge of the divine (although Friends employed a great many words to do this). I am suggesting that the divine may best be understood not by removing language but rather by investigating its nature. And what better way can this be

done than through literature?

One of the characters in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is an enigmatic Englishwoman named Mrs. Moore. She is old, tired, ordinary, and does not want to be in India. But she is tolerant of the Hindus, although at the same time she does not question her Anglican upbringing. In the end, after she dies, she becomes a kind of sibyl, a goddess even, breaking down barriers between English Christians and Indian Hindus or Muslims. Forster uses her to advance his novel from a clever examination of cultural differences to something much deeper: a mystical investigation of the nature of reality. He does this by making Mrs. Moore go on an excursion to a touristic site, a group of caves. These caves are nothing special, except that they have a peculiar echo, and even that is nothing special. "Whatever is said," the narrator tells us, "the same monotonous noise replies. . . . 'Boum' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum,' or 'ou-boum.'" But then he adds, broadly hinting at what is going to affect Mrs. Moore so devastatingly: "Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce 'boum.'" When Mrs. Moore enters the cave, we read:

[T]he echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. . . . [I]t had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same—"ou-boum." If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo . . . —it would amount to the same . . . [And] suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion

appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from "Let there be Light" to "It is finished" only amounted to "boum." Then she was terrified.

What has terrified Mrs. Moore so exceedingly (or should we say, perhaps, has "made her quake"?) is that she has discovered a realm beyond language, a realm that, because it refuses to make distinctions, undermines her previous religiosity, her Christian value system which is based precisely on distinctions between good and evil, Christ and Satan. Robert Barclay, too, must have had some intimations of the distinctionless nature of deity when, as we saw earlier, he admonished Friends in meeting to bring to a halt the roving of the imagination on things that are essentially good as well as things that are evil; but Forster's story, which draws on Hindu teaching, does this much more strongly and specifically. His "boum" or "bou-oum," or "ou-boum" is the Hindu mystic syllable *Om*, which may be analyzed into the elements a + u + m, which in turn transcend threefold time—past, present, future—and lead to the fourth state, which is without an element. This alone is real. "He who utters the single syllable *Aum*," declares the Bhagavad-gita, "goes to the highest goal." He does so by way of a journey that the Mandukya Upanishad analyzes into the three steps of waking, sleeping, and deep-sleep that lead to knowledge of the "inexpressible Absolute"—the fourth state: silent, beyond language. We are left with the lovely paradox expressed by the Chandogya Upanishad as follows: "As all leaves are held together by a spike, so all speech is held together by *Om*." Poor Mrs. Moore, not being even a Quaker, much less a Hindu, and armed with nothing more than her Anglican form of "poor little talkative Christianity," can only feel undermined by *Om*, which seems to her to rob the world

of value. How can she know that terror for some may be awe for others, or that wordlessness, the repository of speech, may be the precondition of meaning?

To pass beyond her terror we need Samuel Beckett as a guide, for he brilliantly employs words to examine wordlessness, and wordlessness to enhance the value of words. His novel *Murphy*, published in 1938, presents a character, Murphy himself, who might almost have been reading Robert Barclay, for Murphy's major desire is (to use Barclayan language again) to halt the roving imagination of the natural man. Said in Beckett's way, Murphy does not want to do, he wants simply to be. He does not go to Friends' meeting to accomplish this, since he is a seedy solipsist rather than a Quaker, but he has equivalent rituals. As the novel opens, he has tied himself into a rocking chair in his dingy apartment and is increasing the rock in the expectation of transcending threefold time—of rocking himself not only out of the body but out of all the self-workings and motions of his mind, in things that are essentially good as well as things that are evil. But the telephone rings! Beckett's point, pursued with hilarious ingenuity throughout the remainder of the novel, is that whereas our noblest effort is to escape contingency, we are condemned ineluctably to remain the playthings of contingency, the only escape being death. In his masterpiece, the trilogy of novels called *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, which I am going to save for the end of this essay, he clearly views words themselves as instruments of contingency, silence as the precondition of transcendence; but he also understands, as did the Upanishads, that all speech is "held together" by silence. Beckett's debt to Hindu thought is already clear in *Murphy*, whose sixth chapter is devoted to steps toward transcendence that pick up language and ideas from the Upanishads.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Murphy's absolute is not a traditional Christian one; it is



too influenced not only by Hinduism but also by the Nietzschean revaluation of all values that replaced Being with Becoming, not to mention its corollary, the subsequent displacement of Newton by Einstein. Yet Murphy in his own way, a very twentieth-century one, is waiting upon the Lord.

Is this distinction between speech and silence really so esoteric as it seems when presented through Hinduism? Is it really so philosophically modern as it seems when presented through Beckett's *Murphy*? I think neither, because we find the same distinction in the tradition of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. To illustrate this, let me present another story:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. . . . And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." . . . And God called the firmament Heaven. . . . And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. (Genesis 1:1-6, 8-10, RSV.)

What this lovely story tells us is that God, in order to create the world, reached out (as it were) from a distinctionless, timeless, shapeless, placeless state of Being in order to *do* something, and that the realm of Doing involved making distinctions of time, shape, and place in the hitherto formless

void, distinctions that were then ratified by language, by naming: He called the light Day, the darkness he called Night, and so forth. The centrality of naming in this creative process is confirmed in the second version of the Genesis story, the one in which Adam is created not last but first. Note what happens next: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field" (Genesis 2:18-20, RSV). Here we see what we all know from experience: that human beings, formed after all in God's image, imitate the divine process of naming by which distinctions are ratified. Thus the infant gradually learns to separate the light from the darkness, its mother's breast from its mother's hand or mouth, its mother's smooth face from its father's hairy face, the waters from the waters (urine from milk), and then, like God, like Adam, the infant names things: mama, papa, weewee. But there is also an immense difference. The child eventually becomes aware that it, too, has a name, even if only "Baby" at first. And it calls itself by that name, thus separating itself from its parents and siblings. The immense difference lies in the fact that God does not do this. God does not have a name because God (at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition that we inherit) is distinctionless and bodiless—omnipresent, eternal, without place, shape, time, or boundaries<sup>4</sup>—whereas a name, as we have seen, serves to separate, to distinguish, to assign boundaries to something, giving it a body in effect. Furthermore, God can no more be internally fragmented than cut off from the created world. But when we name ourselves, we split ourselves in two. The moment we

become conscious of ourselves as distinct and ratify that self-consciousness by imposing a name, we divide the "I" into an "I" and a "me." When baby says "Baby weewee," baby as formerly unified subject has now established a relationship with itself as object—it should properly say "*me* weewee" rather than "*I* weewee." God, who by definition is unified, cannot do this and therefore cannot have a name; God is what Beckett calls "the unnamable."

Thus when Moses wants to learn God's name so that he can talk to the polytheistic Israelites about the one true God, the Lord replies, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14, RSV). God refuses to assume a true name, *i.e.*, a noun—in linguistic jargon, refuses nominalization. In the first half of the same verse the Lord gives this non-name as "I AM WHO I AM," which in the Hebrew original also means "I will be what I will be." God cannot be limited via tenses any more than via the boundaries established by nominalization. Instead, the Lord asserts beingness, transcending both space and threefold time.<sup>5</sup> In the next verse, still playing it would seem with poor Moses, the Lord employs the ineffable Tetragrammaton Y-H-W-H, from which we get the supposed name conjecturally pronounced Yahweh. This is a "supposed name" because even the Tetragrammaton is not a nominal form but a verbal one, connected once more with "to be." The pronunciation is conjectural since "the use of any proper name for the one and only God, as though there were other gods from whom He had to be distinguished, was discontinued in Judaism before the Christian era." Instead, vowel signs were attached "indicating that in [the Tetragrammaton's] place should be read the Hebrew word *Adonai* meaning 'Lord' (or *Elohim* meaning 'God'). The ancient Greek translators substituted the word *Kyrios* (Lord) for the Name. The Vulgate likewise used the Latin word *Dominus*." The King

James Version, with few exceptions, renders the Tetragrammaton by the English words LORD or GOD printed in capitals, a practice followed by the Revised Standard Version, too, as a way of recognizing, as the editors state, that the use of any proper name for the one and only God "is entirely inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church."

Hence the distinction between naming and namelessness, and more generally between speech and silence, may be found in the Hebrew Testament. What about the Christian Testament? Here, the central text is the famous Prologue to John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . [A]ll things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 3-4, 14, RSV). It is noteworthy that John's Greek starts with the exact phrase, ἐν ἀρχῇ (in the beginning), that also starts Genesis in the Septuagint Greek translation, which is the version of the Hebrew Testament that John, a Hellenized Jew, would have known. In other words, John's Gospel begins with the same transition from Being to Doing that is the initial subject of Genesis. John explains the transition by assigning Doing to the Word, *i.e.*, to the Son as opposed to God the Father. But he then complicates everything by saying at the same time, "the Word was God." Hence "the Prologue announces clearly the two stark paradoxes of the Christian faith: (i) the trinitarian paradox of the relationship between the Son and the Father, distinct yet one in the unity of the Godhead, the paradox of distinction-within-unity; and (ii) the paradox of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh."

Needless to say, this short text has given rise to endless controversy. What precisely did John mean by the term *logos*,

which our Bible translates as "Word"? Where did he find the term, primarily in Hellenistic sources or in Jewish ones? More importantly, at least for our own consideration: Is the Word to be connected chiefly with the Doing aspect of Godhead or with the Being aspect? If the former, it will be connected with words—with naming, with speech—whereas if the latter, it must somehow be connected with silence and be similar to the mystic syllable *Om* in serving as the precondition of speech, so that we could say "As all leaves are held together by a spike, so all words are held together by the Word."

I shall have to rehearse some of the controversy occasioned by John's term before proceeding to George Fox's distinction between words and the Word.



Classical Greek usage of the term *logos* does not help us, because although the primary meaning was "speech," the term also meant the precondition of speech, namely "reason"—hence our English derivatives "logic" and "logical." The standard Greek-English dictionary, Liddell and Scott's, begins its entry as follows: "*Logos*, the word or outward form by which the inward thought is expressed and made known; also the inward thought or reason itself, so that *logos* comprehends both the Latin *ratiō* and *oratio*." Liddell and Scott end their long entry by noting that usage in the Christian Testament comprises both of the above general significations, which the Fathers distinguished as "uttered words" on the one hand and "reason inward-placed" on the other.<sup>6</sup> It is this inward signification that seems eventually to have reached John, whether directly through Hellenistic sources or indirectly through Jewish ones, or both.

In the pagan sources, the internalization may have

begun as far back as around 500 B.C. with Heraclitus, although scholars differ in their interpretation of his use of the term *logos* in key assertions such as "Although this Logos is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it. . . . That is to say, although all things come to pass in accordance with this Logos, men seem to be quite without any experience of it." The general view, however, is that Heraclitus, striving to "explain the continuity amid all the flux that is visible in the universe, . . . resorted to *logos* as the eternal principle of order." Stoicism, which flourished in the third century B.C., popularized the concept of God as the *logos spermatikos*, the "seminal Reason of the universe." But the figure closest to John in this evolution was Philo Judæus, the Græco-Judaic philosopher who flourished in Alexandria, Egypt, *circa* A.D. 40, about a half-century before John's Gospel was published. A neo-Platonist, he continued Plato's notion, expressed most famously in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, that elements of the sensible world are but images of eternal, unchanging Ideas that are the true reality—ideas that are always "one in form": "absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality." Combining this with Stoic thought, Philo posited the *logos* of God as the divine prototype of which the created universe is but a copy. But he also treated the *logos* as the instrument of creation, *i.e.*, as the doer.

The parallels between Philo and John are striking. Nevertheless, most scholars now argue that "these parallels can be accounted for by the view that they are due to common dependence on the Hebrew Testament"—more specifically, that both Philo and John drew from Wisdom Literature: the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, a text actually not written by Solomon in Hebrew but most likely "composed in Greek by an unknown Hellenistic Jew, probably at Alexandria during the

latter part of the first century B.C.," a hundred years or so before John's Gospel and perhaps fifty or sixty before Philo.<sup>7</sup> We find *logos* treated here primarily as the intermediary between God and the world, the doer of God's will whether that will be creative as in chapter 9, "O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy, who has made all things by thy word, and by thy wisdom has formed man" (9:1-2, RSV) or destructive as in chapter 18: "thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven . . . into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command" (18:15-16, RSV). But we should note as well that *logos* (word) and *sophia* (God's eternal wisdom) are commonly paired as synonyms, as in the passage from chapter 9 just quoted. This pairing eases the assimilation of *logos* in Wisdom Literature to the Platonic sense of the word as participating in God's eternal, unchanging Being. Thus Saint Athanasius, for example, campaigning in the fourth century against the Arian heresy that considered the Son not eternal and therefore not God by nature but a changeable creature, retorted that the Word of God "endureth for ever, not changed . . . For it was fitting, since God is one, that his Image should be one also, and his Word one and his Wisdom one."

The issues raised here were discussed in post-Biblical theology long before Fox and others picked them up in the seventeenth century. The early Church Father Tertullian, who flourished around A.D. 200, equated the Word with Reason, *i.e.*, with Being instead of Doing. (Here and elsewhere, I use a capital R for Reason as signifying the divine rather than the human mind.) Tertullian argued that speech has its ground in Reason, is included in it, and that Reason therefore precedes speech:

For before all things God was alone—being in Himself and for Himself universe, and space, and all things. . . .

Yet even not then was He alone; for He had with Him that which He possessed in Himself, that is to say, His own Reason. For God is rational, and Reason was first in Him. . . . This Reason is His own Thought, which the Greeks call λόγος, by which term we also designate Word [*Sermonen*]. . . . God had not Word [*Sermonalis*] from the beginning, but He had Reason [*Rationalis*] even before the beginning; because also Word itself consists of Reason, which it thus proves to have been the prior existence as being its own substance. . . . [A]lthough God had not yet sent [out] His Word [*Sermonem*], He still had Him within Himself . . . as He silently planned and arranged within Himself everything which He was afterwards about to utter through His Word.

Saint Athanasius, whom we have already encountered rebutting the Arians in the fourth century, asserted, as Fox was to assert thirteen centuries later, that “the word of a man is composed of syllables and only signifies the speaker’s will, and then is over and lost . . . [whereas] God’s Word is one and the same and, as it is written [Psalm 119:89], the Word of God endureth for ever, not changed.” So, the distinction between words and the Word can be attested in post-Biblical discussion. And so can the distinction between words and silence, with the implication that the Word should be identified with silence. If nothing else, when the Word was linked with Doing rather than Being, i.e., with speech rather than Reason, it was sometimes thought to issue from God’s silence. We have already seen this in Tertullian. Similarly, the Apostolic Father Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the first century, wrote that God “manifested Himself through Jesus Christ, His Son—who, being His Word, came forth out of the silence into the world.” This being the case, if we then link the Word with Being rather than Doing, it follows that the Word



itself—the Johannine Logos—becomes paradoxically silent. Compare the German mystical theologian Meister Eckhart (circa 1260-circa 1329): “I talk of the purity of the divine nature—that brightness of the divine nature which is ineffable. God is a Word but an unexpressed Word. . . . Saint John said: ‘In the beginning was the Word: and the Word was with God and the Word was God’ (Jn. 1:1). Now then, whoever should hear this Word in the Father—where it is completely still—must be quite still and cut off from all images and forms.” It is worth adding that, outside of Christian speculation, the rabbinic exegesis of Genesis 1-3 maintains that before God said “Let there be light” there was silence. Also, we know from Hellenistic papyri, and from pagan hymns to silence, that in the Greek milieu in which John existed “silence was a mark of the *Deus absconditus* [the hidden God].”



With the startling paradox in mind that the Word may be silent, we should be ready to listen to George Fox. The point I have been trying to make is that Fox did not invent anything new; rather, he picked up an existing line of interpretation. The difference between Fox and his predecessors is that he placed this interpretation at the very center of Christian faith and practice.

Fox follows John's Prologue in identifying the Word with Christ. Moreover, he repeatedly distinguishes the Word from words, especially from the words of the Scriptures. Thus in the declaration drawn up for the governor and assembly at Barbados in 1671 Fox speaks of the Scriptures as “the words not *word* of God.” His *Journal* is characteristically pugnacious on this issue: “They asked me whether the Scripture was the word of God. I said, God was the Word and the Scriptures

were writings; and the Word was before writings were, which Word did fulfil them." "Many priests that came to me would be . . . saying the Scriptures were the Word, and I asked them how many gods there were, and they said, 'One.' I asked them whether God was not the Word, and they would say, 'Yes.' And so I let them see how they did confound themselves." Note the similarity to Tertullian's view, cited earlier, that Reason precedes speech and that speech has its ground in Reason. Furthermore, note the reiteration of Athanasius's view, also cited earlier, that since God is one his Word is one, *i.e.*, unified and unchanging, as compared to the words of a human being, which are composed of syllables and only signify the speaker's will, and then are over and lost. Another well-known pronouncement in Fox's *Journal* hammers the point home: "[T]he many languages began at Babel and they set them a-top of Christ the Word when they crucified him. And John the divine, who preached the Word that was in the beginning, said that the beast and the whore have power over tongues and languages, and they are as waters. . . . And Peter and John, that could not read letters, preached the word, Christ Jesus, which was in the beginning before Babel was."

For Fox, then, words are inauthentic. Even the memorable words of poor little talkative Christianity from "Let there be Light" to "It is finished" are inauthentic compared with the unified, enduring, unfragmented Reason or Light or Life or Word that John says not only "was with God" but "was God." Early Friends were obsessed with the inauthenticity of Babel, which for Barclay, we should remember, projected nothing more than the natural will and wisdom of human beings. Friends defended silent waiting as a means to enable the worshiper to be actuated by God's light by avoiding the idolatry of self-worship. What we can now add to this understanding, by virtue of linguistic analysis, is the further understanding

that silent waiting is not just a means but also an end. Why? *Because in abandoning the inauthenticity of language, the silent worshipers in a Friends' meeting ritualistically participate in Godhead.*

Naming divides. Grammar divides, distinguishing subject from object, masculine from feminine, past from present, even the self-consciously perceived "me" from the perceiving "I." But silence unifies. Barclay speaks of the soul in a successful Friends' meeting for worship being gathered out of all its own thoughts and workings. Should we not also speak of each isolated soul in a successful meeting being gathered *in to* an indivisible communality, a oneness possible only because words are absent? In the meeting's silence we enter E. M. Forster's cave with Mrs. Moore, hear the mystical syllable *Om*, and are not terrified. In the meeting's silence, we flee Doing and enter Being, rocking ourselves like Beckett's Murphy out of the contingency of threefold time. In the meeting's silence we ascend Diotima's Platonic ladder to unchanging Ideas that are always one in form.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of this linguistic analysis is that it works just as well for the Nietzschean concept of Godhead as for the Platonic. Fox follows Saint John—who follows Wisdom Literature, and Philo perhaps, and the Stoics, and of course Plato himself—in positing the Godhead as Being rather than Becoming, as the Form of Forms, unchanging, unified, inactive in itself although containing the potential for action. And this is probably the way most of us, too, picture divinity. But most of modern philosophy, not to mention modern science, disagrees.<sup>8</sup> The modern view of "true reality" favors process, i.e., Becoming over Being—a tumult of non-Newtonian motion, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new Becoming. Nevertheless, this modern Godhead still possesses unity, although now a dynamic

rather than a static one; indeed in Nietzsche's analysis in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work that aspired to destroy the Platonic view, the dynamic unity of true reality is contrasted to a principle of individuation, namely, the force that produces separate individuals who are merely illusory images of true reality and are prevented from knowing Godhead until their individuality is broken down. But this same principle of individuation also produces separate words, produces them out of the *Om*-like true reality that holds all speech together. Words therefore become a barrier between us and Godhead, which can best be expressed in human terms, Nietzsche claims, by dance and music as opposed to speech, since neither dance nor music distinguishes or separates, the way speech does.

The process philosopher Henri Bergson, an important influence on Beckett, William James, D. H. Lawrence, Nikos Kazantzakis, James Joyce, and other rebels against traditional theism, takes Nietzsche's metaphysical critique of language and applies it to human psychology. For him, the true self is, like Nietzsche's Godhead, one in which conscious states are neither distinguishable nor separable, but melt into one another to form an organic whole. This ever-changing inner life, he continues, is "inexpressible, because language cannot get hold of it without arresting its mobility." No two experiences or sensations are the same; yet when I speak of them "I abstract this changeableness to give it a name . . . and solidify it. . . . [S]ensations . . . seem to me to be *objects* as soon as I isolate and name them, [whereas] in the human soul there are only *processes*." In sum, "there is no common measure between mind and language."

Whether we conceive of Godhead as Being or Becoming, language stands as an impediment whereas silence is a perfect ritualistic means to renew our connection with true reality. The great secret that Fox and the other early Friends

discovered was to eliminate language from Quaker worship.

But language is *not* eliminated from Quaker worship. Try as we might to wait upon the Lord, beating down into silence the roving of our imagination, we cannot; indeed, we sometimes feel relieved despite ourselves when the dynamic processes of the silence that are so deliciously melting into one another to form an organic whole are interrupted by spoken ministry that arrests the silence's mobility and gives it a name, stabilizing it. A meeting, after all, is still a human phenomenon, subject to the principle of individuation even though our purpose in worship is (momentarily) to escape individuation. In addition, the telephone seems always to ring precisely in the middle of worship! Even while waiting on the Lord we remain the fragmented playthings of contingency and as such are condemned to use words, those emblems of fragmentation. Perhaps this is not regrettable, however, despite everything I have been arguing. "The Word became flesh," after all, which means in part that the Word became words, including Scripture and all the rest of "poor little talkative Christianity." Richard Bauman, in his book on Quaker silence, has defined the essence of the Quaker religious experience as the "reconciliation of the human necessity of speaking with the spiritual need for silence." That is well said. But we must avoid a dualistic separation between heaven and earth, remembering instead the central Christian paradox of distinction-within-unity. Quakers were accused of heresy in the early days (and later) insofar as they "rejected the notion . . . that language . . . could contain truly 'substantial' meaning." They saw the Scriptures as "hopelessly insubstantial . . . shadows," and this exposed them to the danger whereby "flesh melts into spirit, imitation of Christ slides into identity with Christ," as in the case of James Nayler. Let us hope that our own Quaker meetings may honor the paradox that the Word contains words within itself,

just as the inactive Godhead contains within itself the possibility of action. Words—although inauthentic, inorganic, divisive, the instruments of contingency—are in us, derived from silence, just as the light and life of divinity are in us. Conversely, we are in them. As Samuel Beckett's narrator says in *The Unnamable*, "I'm in words, made of words, others' words, . . . I'm all these words, all these strangers . . . coming together to say . . . that I am they."



It is appropriate that this reconsideration of Quaker silence from a literary point of view should end with Beckett because his trilogy, more than any other text in modern literature, explores not only the conflict between silence and speech but also the ineluctable synergy—"together-working"—between silence and speech. Beckett's concern began at least from *Murphy* on and evolved through a series of characters who are fundamentally all the same although possessing different names—Murphy, Molloy, Moran, Malone, Macmann—until in the final novel of the trilogy these characters, who now may be seen as mere images of reality, come much closer to the true reality behind them all: the Unnamable. The long process from *Murphy* to the *Unnamable* carries Murphy's quest for authenticity ever further. The successive characters strive to do less and less and to be more and more, thereby escaping contingency; they strive to advance from the multiplicity, fragmentation, and divisiveness of words to the unity and integrity of the silent Word. And, of course, they fail. In religious language—appropriate because Beckett is such a profoundly religious writer—they yearn to unite with God; yet they remain inescapably God's creatures in a world that is incorrigibly inauthentic. They are us. They are every Quaker who sits in

meeting week after week striving to escape the language of what Barclay calls the human being in his natural state, striving to escape language altogether, in order to participate via silence in something immeasurably more authentic, yet realizing again and again that this is impossible, that we are in words and, worse, others' words, that we are forced to keep on talking, talking even about silence, because the religious quest to escape language is predicated on self-consciousness and self-consciousness is impossible without language.

So, the synergy between speech and silence is finally what must interest us most. What I mean is the understanding that silence is not speech's elimination so much as its seed-bed, or (to return to the metaphor used in connection with *Om*) the spike that holds all the leaves of speech together. This synergy is not too different from that between what the linguist Roman Jakobson calls the "code" and the "message." Code he defines as "the repository of all possible constituent parts"; any given "message" (notice that he uses the same term that Quakers do) is drawn from this code. What happens in meeting for worship is that we attempt not only to enter the integrity of unfragmented silence and in this way to simulate Godhead ritualistically, but we also attempt to enter the code—even, in a sense, to re-create it—via our own messages. Said in another way, we attempt to "give birth to something wordless in words." And this is precisely what happens in Beckett's novel. As in a gathered Quaker meeting, so too in the novel, we are made to feel that the messages (in Beckett's case, stories about named images of reality such as Malone, Macmann, and so forth) emerge from, and are then drawn back into, a namelessness that is the ground or code of all naming. It is good, by the way, that the messages in meeting (as in the novel) are disparate, sometimes incomplete, sometimes mere ejaculations of hope or sorrow or prayer. For it is this very disparity and

incompletion that continually reminds us of the synergetic relation between these messages and the silence that is an excess of potential messages still unexpressed (or perhaps inexpressible), whereas polished sermons composed in the minister's study, because they call attention to the powers of a particular human being, obscure the most basic religious truth that they are meant to reveal.

The extraordinary force of a successful Quaker meeting, then, is not only its reenactment of the nature of Godhead through silence but in addition its reenactment of the synergy between that Godhead and us through the spoken messages that emerge from silence and die back into it. I keep using the word "successful" because, as we all know, meetings do not always work. Yet—just like Beckett's characters—we keep trying. Like them, we yearn to be lifted out of contingency and become like God, yet realize that we cannot. Like them, we yearn to escape naming, to be unnamable ourselves and therefore to achieve an integrity impossible so long as the "I" creates a "me" by the mere fact of self-consciousness; yet, we realize that we can escape neither self-consciousness nor naming without escaping ourselves, i.e., dying. So, while still in this life, we are caught—but caught deliciously, for the synergy between silence and speech releases extraordinary amounts of creative energy.

Nowhere is this energy more evident than in Beckett's trilogy, where the narrator yearns with part of himself to be silent. "Then I could stop," he says, "I'd be the silence, I'd be back in the silence, we'd be reunited, . . . then it . . . will be I, it will be . . . the silence, the end, the beginning, the beginning again." Yet he knows at the same time that the very yearning to be wordless cannot exist without words. So, like Quakers in meeting, he does not stop; instead, he goes on, caught within this dilemma, yet also energized by it. We see this in the conclusion to *The Unnamable*:



I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, . . . I don't know, that's all words, . . . all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, . . . you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, . . perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

It does not matter if this passage presents silence and speech as an unresolved dilemma. In Beckett, as in meeting, the silence of the wordless Word paradoxically gives meaning to the messages, just as the messages paradoxically give meaning to the silence. Had poor Mrs. Moore known this, she might have reacted to the wordlessness of her cave not with terror but with religious awe.

## NOTES

1. This essay is a revised version of the third annual Rufus Jones Associates Lecture, delivered at Haverford College on April 10, 1991. I wish to thank Edwin Bronner, John Cary, Douglas Gwyn, Rev. Christopher Huntington, Larry Ingle, Rebecca Kratz Mays, Dorothy Steere, and anonymous members of the Pendle Hill Publications Committee for suggestions that have been gratefully incorporated. Documentation is excluded from the text; it is given immediately following these notes.

2. I cite Dean Freiday's "translation" into modern English.

3. Thus we read that for Murphy the inexpressible absolute contains "neither elements nor states, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming . . . Here he was . . . a mote in the dark of absolute freedom[,] . . . a missile without provenance or target, caught up in a tumult of non-Newtonian motion[,] . . . in . . . will-lessness . . . (Beckett 1957: 112-113).

4. Cf. Swinburne, who sums up the central doctrines of traditional theism as follows: God is "a person without a body (*i.e.*, a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (*i.e.*, omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship" (1977: 2; cited in Frankenberry 1987: 26).

5. Compare Jesus' answer to the Jews when they are scandalized because he seems to say that he has seen Abraham: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58, RSV).

6. λόγος προφορικός and λόγος ἐνδιάθετος (ἐν + διατίθημι, inward-placed). Anticipating our subsequent discussion of sources, it is important to note that the Fathers' language derives from Philo (*De Vita Mosis* 2.129).

7. The Hebrew Testament background to the Christian Testament's and later Christianity's understanding of the Word can be investigated as well via the Hebrew *Dabhar*, "the word that gives birth to the blessing that creation is" (M. Fox 1980: 43), a concept that lies at the heart of Meister Eckhart's theology. "This is the Word with which Genesis begins the Scriptures—it is the dynamic, active word that, when spoken, creates. . . . Thus Eckhart can say that the Father or Creator *is a speaking action*" (M. Fox 1980: 60).

8. For a lucid review of revisionist philosophical theism as opposed to traditional theological theism, see Frankenberry 1987: 25ff., et passim.

## DOCUMENTATION

- |       |  |  |
|-------|--|--|
| p. 3  | Blessed be the man<br><br>I love to feel where words<br>come from  | Harkianakis 1985: 261. Μακαρισμός<br>(Beatitude), translated by Peter Bien.<br>Woolman 1971: 133.  |
| p. 4  | Nothing could be more unlike<br>acted by God's light and<br>grace in   | Barclay 1991: Proposition 11, ¶ VII.<br>Barclay 1991: Proposition 11, ¶ VII.   |
| p. 5  | to abstain from one's own<br>thoughts<br>gathered . . . out of all of its<br>own thoughts  | Barclay 1991: Proposition 11 ¶ X,<br>italics added.<br>Barclay 1991: Proposition 11, ¶ IX.   |
| p. 6  | Whatever is said<br>[T]he echo began in some<br>indescribable  | Forster 1924, ch. xiv.<br>Forster 1924, ch. xiv.   |
| p. 7  | mystic syllable <i>Om</i><br><br>analyzed into the elements<br>a + u + m<br>without an element<br><br>goes to the highest goal<br><br>waking, sleeping, and<br>deep-sleep<br>inexpressible Absolute<br>As all leaves are held<br>together by | Mundaka Upanishad, in<br>Radhakrishnan and Moore<br>1957: 53.<br>Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 56.<br><br>Mandukya Upanishad, in<br>Radhakrishnan and Moore<br>1957: 55-56.<br>Bhagavad-gita, ch. 8 §13, in<br>Radhakrishnan and Moore<br>1957: 130.<br>Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 56.<br><br>Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 130.<br>Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 65. |
| p. 9  | revaluation of all values<br>replaced Being with Becoming  | Nietzsche 1990: 31, 197.<br>Nietzsche 1990: 45, 47.  |
| p. 11 | the use of any proper name<br>indicating that in<br>[the Tetragrammaton's]   | May and Metzger 1965: xii.<br>May and Metzger 1965: xii.   |
| p. 12 | is entirely inappropriate<br>for the   | May and Metzger 1965: xii.   |

- the Prologue announces clearly Pollard 1970: 15.
- p. 14 Although this Logos is eternally valid Fragment 1. Wheelwright 1959: 19.
- explain the continuity amid all the flux Brown 1966: 520; cf. Kahn 1979: 130; Wheelwright 1959: 21-23.
- seminal Reason of the universe Diogenes Laertius 1925: ii. 241 (VII. 136. Zeno); Arnim 1921: iv. 93; Wolfson 1947: i.325-326.
- Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* Plato 1989: 210A-212B.
- one in form Plato 1989: 211B.
- absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted Plato 1989: 211E.
- Philo posited the Logos of God as Philo Judæus 1929: *De Opificio Mundi* 25, cited by Sidebottom 1961: 32; also *De Vita Mosis* 2.127.
- as the doer Philo Judæus 1935: *De Vita Mosis* 2.127, cited by Wolfson 1947: i. 331.
- these parallels can be accounted for Pollard 1970: 12.
- composed in Greek by an unknown May and Metzger 1965: 102.
- p. 15 endureth for ever, not changed Migne 1857: xxvi, columns 224-225; cited in Pollard 1970: 196.
- Tertullian argued that speech has its Pollard 1970: 61.
- For before all things God was alone Tertullian 1870: 5.2-4.
- p. 16 the word of a man is composed of Migne 1857: xxvi, columns 220, 224; cf. Pollard 1970: 195-196.
- manifested Himself through Ignatius 1949: 8.2; cf. Brown 1966: 524.
- p. 17 I talk of the purity M. Fox 1980: 57.
- Saint John said M. Fox 1980: 128.
- rabbinic exegesis of Brown 1966: 524.
- Genesis 1-3
- silence was a mark of the *Deus* Brown 1966: 524.
- the words not *word* of God G. Fox 1975: 604.

- They asked me whether the  
Scripture
- p. 18 Many priests that came to  
me would
- [T]he many languages began  
at Babel
- p. 19 a tumult of non-Newtonian  
motion
- p. 20 principle of individuation  
a barrier between us and  
Godhead
- dance and music as opposed  
to speech
- to form an organic whole  
inexpressible, because  
language cannot
- I abstract this changeableness  
to give it
- there is no common measure  
between
- p. 21 reconciliation of the human  
necessity
- rejected the notion . . . that  
language
- hopelessly insubstantial . . .  
shadows
- slides into identity with Christ
- p. 22 I'm in words, made of words  
at least from Murphy on
- p. 23 the repository of all possible  
give birth to something  
wordless
- p. 24 Then I could stop
- p. 25 I'll wake, in the silence,  
and never
- G. Fox 1975: 159.
- G. Fox 1975: 160.
- G. Fox 1975: 333-334.
- Beckett 1957: 112-113.
- Nietzsche 1956: §16.  
Nietzsche 1956: §6.
- Nietzsche 1956: §1.
- Bergson 1910: 128.  
Bergson 1910: 129.
- Bergson 1910: 131.
- Bergson 1910: 164-165.
- Bauman 1983: 136.
- Luxon n.d.: ch. 2, p. 31.
- Luxon n.d.: ch. 2, p. 26.
- Luxon n.d.: ch. 1, pp. 16-17.
- Beckett 1959: 390.  
Beckett 1959: 295.
- Jakobson 1956: 61.  
Abbott 1977: 40.
- Beckett 1959: 417.
- Beckett 1959: 418.

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